

English as a Second Language / Dialect

ESL – English as a second language	ESD – English as a second dialect
SAE – Standard Australian English	AE – Aboriginal English
L1 – Language 1	L2 – Language 2

Approximately 40% of students in the Northern Territory speak a language other than English at home eg Kriol, Aboriginal English, Greek, Tagalog, Warlpiri. This means that in most classes in NT schools teachers will need to cater for ESL students. Many of these students live in remote Indigenous communities, and speak their first language at home and in the community. They rely heavily on learning and practising English at school, and have specific learning needs related to their English language development and the cultural conventions of the language.

Standard Australian English (SAE) is Australia's national language and is the foundation language of our education, training and employment systems. It is the common medium for communication and the exchange of ideas across a population of widely varying ethnic, language and racial backgrounds.

Although some students learn SAE as a second, third or even fourth language, for convenience purposes in the NT it is referred to as English as a Second Language (ESL). As Aboriginal English (AE) is a recognised dialect of English, Standard Australian English is sometimes taught as a Second Dialect (ESD).

The English language is an integral part of all Learning Areas in the NT Curriculum Framework. To be successful at school learners must be able to use English to learn and to express what they know and understand in both spoken and written language. If they can't represent themselves well through their use of English they are disadvantaged academically and potentially, socially.

ESL/ESD learners are not only learning Standard Australian English but are expected to learn in and through English across the curriculum. This means that all educators in NT schools are responsible for meeting the language learning needs of the ESL/ESD learners in their classes.

The ESL learners in NT schools include:

- Students newly arrived in Australia who have a language background other than English
- Students born in Australia of migrant parents who enter schools with little or no English
- Students who have had all or some of their schooling in Australia, and whose home background includes at least one language other than English
- Indigenous students who come to school speaking one or more local Indigenous languages
- Indigenous students who come to school speaking Kriol
- Indigenous students who come to school speaking Aboriginal English
(adapted from NTCF p95 - 96).

All ESL students have their own cultural heritage and socio-cultural understandings as well as their own first language. Culture and language link together, and valuing learners' first language and cultural identity is highly important. Learning a second language should not be at the expense of losing one's identity.

How does ESL/ESD teaching differ from mainstream teaching?

- For ESL/ESD students every lesson is a language lesson.
- ESL/ESD students are learning through English at the same time as they are learning English.
- Language teaching has to be more explicit.
- It will be necessary to teach new socio-cultural rules as well as language.
- ESL/ESD students already have concepts established in their first language (L1).
- Cognitive (conceptual) development of students is often beyond their language development in the second language (L2).
- ESL/ESD students already have knowledge of language and how it works.
- The English language development of ESL students may be at least 5 years behind that of their English-speaking counterparts.

Code-switching

Generally ESL students are good at code-switching, which is moving from one language to another to suit the situation and audience. Younger students may still talk to themselves in L1 to sort out their thoughts, and it is appropriate to give ESL students opportunities to use their first language in the classroom. Students have to move from the understanding that their language is different to Standard Australian English, through to using them separately and for the correct purposes, to being able to control both languages and switch between them unconsciously.

Passive Learning

For some time, new students may not talk or get involved in interactions and activities in the classroom. However, they are still listening and absorbing information and thinking it through.

There may be a 'silent period' during which the student will concentrate on using all of his or her available resources to understand and participate in the new environment. In other words, he or she will be focusing on the receptive skills of listening (and watching) rather than the productive skill of speaking (Jones, 1996:7).

ESL students may lack the confidence or skills to be an active participant at this stage. There is nothing wrong with this as they are just not ready to take part yet. Encourage students without undue pressure though there will come a time when you must let them know you expect more contribution, and you can provide opportunities that will allow them to participate confidently, with out too much attention being drawn to them.

Formal and Informal Learning

Indigenous students have come from cultures of 'informal learning'. Coming into the school environment is a foreign experience for many Indigenous students as the school culture places the notion of learning into an environment with four walls. Some of the most productive oral language learning experiences with Indigenous students have been reported to have taken place in less formal situations, and often, outside of the classroom.

Informal learning does not require the skills of reading and writing. It does not need a building called a school or a person called a teacher.

People learn informally by

- being with someone who is respected
- watching and imitating others
- doing things over and over again
- doing things that are important in everyday life
- doing things that have real meaning in a particular situation.

Formal learning involves

- teachers and special buildings
- providing lots of information
- discussing that information
- making generalisations about it
- practising in special ways what has to be learned.

At times we can use some informal learning styles and formal learning styles together. It depends on the sort of things we are trying to learn. (Guy, 1981)

Differences between Learning English as L1 and L2

"Learning ESL differs from learning English as a first language in the selection and timing of content, in methodologies and in assessment, because students are learning along a differing developmental continuum," (English as a Second Language Policy, 1999).

Learning English as a second language is not the same as learning English as a first language. There are some similarities, but there are also a number of differences that must be considered when teaching students ESL.

ESL learners, particularly young learners, are still developing in their first language, yet must also take on increasingly complex information in a second language. These students are learning **about English, in English and through English**. As they move through the school years, the use of English language becomes more sophisticated and for many students they are effectively "chasing a moving target".

Young children may not be aware that their home language is different from the language at school so learning the standard forms may not appear to be a meaningful activity.

Dialect speakers have a strong attachment to their dialect, not only because they are fluent and comfortable in its use, but also because it gives them a sense of belonging and a means of identifying with their families and other people in their home environment.

The importance of L1 in the development of L2

When children learn language, they also learn the related concepts. Language is not only labels, it contains meaning driven by purpose. When learning a second language, children who have a strong first language are in a much better position as they already have the understandings on which to assimilate the new information. Pauline Gibbons (1991:7) explains this:

...imagine that someone is trying to teach you to tell the time in (a) new language. Because you are able to tell the time in English, and have already developed a range of concepts related to time and clocks and numbers, you would, while you are listening to your new language, be making connections with what you already know. Though the language itself is new to you, the concepts are familiar ones, and what you are developing in this situation is a new 'label' for old learning. Now imagine how much more difficult it would be to learn to tell the time in an unknown language if you had not first learned to do it in English, and perhaps had never seen a clock. Now there is nothing to peg your new language to, and it will be much harder for you to learn.

So, if you have sorted out the world in one language, it becomes much easier to sort it out again in a second language. Children who arrive in school with a strong command of their first language and a developed range of concepts in that language are thus in a very favourable position to learn English. They are adding on a second language to the one they already have. Younger children, whose language skills are less well developed, are in a less favourable position to learn a second language. With less conceptual and linguistic development, they have fewer pegs on which to hang new learning.

Many Indigenous ESL students maintain a strong first language, but do not have the concepts and understandings of non-Indigenous society. This is where it is important to distinguish between **linguistic gap** and **conceptual gap**. Where a student may not know a word for something he/she is familiar with, there is a linguistic gap. Where the student may have no experience of the idea or object, there is a conceptual gap. This is something we must keep in mind when working with students - we may be talking about something that they have had no experience of, and therefore have no concept of. This enforces the need to develop rich contexts in our teaching to give the students the experiences and understandings that go with the language.

When we observe children talking in the playground, they may appear to have quite advanced English language skills. They are able to play well with their peers and seem to demonstrate communication abilities beyond those being demonstrated in the classroom environment. This is because the oral language skills we use in informal social contexts are vastly different from the language demands of academic learning.

ESL students may quickly develop the skills necessary to play and interact with their friends as there is enough contextual support to enable them to master such situations. Social interactions usually occur in a meaningful social context, they are not very demanding cognitively and the language required is not specialized. These language skills usually develop within six months to two years after arrival.

Within the classroom however, the language used for academic learning is often decontextualised, and includes subject specific language so is difficult for ESL students to master as quickly as informal social language. New ideas, concepts and language are presented to the students at the same time with the language becoming more cognitively demanding. This level of language learning is essential for students to succeed in school. It may take seven to ten years to catch up to their peers. If students have the skills, ideas and concepts in their first language the learning will be more easily transferred to the second language.

ESL learners often face a dramatic reduction in context embedded learning when moving from Early Childhood to Primary, and then from Primary to Middle Years of schooling. This often results in a plateau in English language development for varying periods of time.